

# Chapter 3

## Covid-19, Child Poverty, Catholic Schools and the Insights of Gustavo Gutiérrez



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**Abstract** The quick spread of Covid-19 and the consequent lockdowns in different parts of the world have exacerbated the effects of poverty and child poverty. This chapter will argue that the levels of poverty and child poverty in the United Kingdom were alarmingly high before Covid-19 and that they have risen further as a result of the pandemic. The increase in poverty has impacted on the effectiveness of home-schooling for disadvantaged families due to a lack of resources and there has been a greater uptake at foodbanks. Catholic communities and Catholic schools have responded to this crisis situation and there are examples of enhanced support for vulnerable families. This current situation could be understood as an '*irruption of the poor*' in the United Kingdom and the chapter draws on the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez to arrive at a Christian perspective and response to the situation.

**Keywords** Catholic schools · Gustavo Gutiérrez · Covid-19 child poverty

### Introduction

This chapter explores the relationships between Covid-19, Child Poverty and Catholic Schools by drawing on the insights of Gustavo Gutiérrez. The focus of this chapter is the effects of the lockdown, caused by Covid-19, on children and young people who come from backgrounds of poverty and deprivation. These children already suffered disadvantage in school and this disadvantage has worsened as many have not had sufficient access to learning materials, resources and Internet access in the home. There has also been a sharp rise in food poverty or food insecurity. Many Catholic schools and communities are helping to support these families and while there are sociological, economic and educational lenses to help people make sense of the effects of the crisis, this chapter offers a Christian lens informed by the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez. The chapter begins with an overview of the effects of the lockdown in the United Kingdom on schooling and on the education of children

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in poverty. The next section examines the rise of food poverty, or food insecurity, and provides some examples of Catholic communities and Catholic schools supporting vulnerable families. The chapter continues by outlining the evolution of the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez and some of the critiques of his work. The subsequent sections on Gutiérrez look at poverty, sacred scripture and the poverty of Jesus; the preferential option for the poor and the *irruption of the poor*. This last section argues that we are now experiencing an *irruption of the poor* in the United Kingdom and that preferential option for the poor and solidarity with the poor are the demands of discipleship of Jesus Christ and this ought to be reflected in Catholic schools.

## **The Effects of Covid-19 on Schooling in the United Kingdom**

The coronavirus (Covid-19) led to lockdowns throughout the world in the early to middle part of 2020. At the time of writing, different parts of the world are negotiating different phases of the lockdown process: the continuation of lockdown; emerging from lockdown or the end of lockdown. There are anxieties that there may be a second spike in some parts of the world and the possibility of an immediate return to lockdown. There has been a great deal of discussion about the unprecedented effects of the lockdown on the social structures and routines of what was considered 'normal' life. The lockdown has affected business, employment, recreation, medical treatment, religious practice, eating habits and formal education. It has affected the ways in which people communicate and access information in the United Kingdom and in many parts of the world. The move to virtual communication as a new 'norm', albeit temporary, for many working practices has been accomplished with alacrity and with the development of existing skills and the acquisition of new skills.

In this context, schooling in the UK has been the focus of considerable attention as the majority of children of primary and secondary school age remain at home or prepare for a phased return to school. The children of key workers had the opportunity to continue at school under strict protective measures. The timescale for the phased return in the different nations is not synchronous. The return to school for the majority of children across the UK involves physical distancing measures, increased sanitation and the possibility of attending the school part-time. While acknowledging the heroic efforts of schools and teachers in providing support and resources, and parents engaging in home education, there have been serious concerns about the disruption in the formal education of the children. There were further specific challenges for Catholic schools as the children and staff of Catholic schools have been unable to maintain links with local parishes, physically participate in the Eucharist and it has been harder to maintain the sense of the partnership between the school and the parents in the Christian community of the school (Vatican News 2020).

There have been serious concerns about the effects of the lockdown on the most vulnerable children, those living in poverty. Before the outbreak of the virus, there were signs that child poverty was increasing as a result of factors such as changes in Government benefits and low-paid or insecure employment (Child Poverty Action

Group 2020a). The children and young people are dependents and they share in the poverty of their households. The number of children living in poverty in the UK in 2018–19 was 4.2 million after housing costs had been deducted. This figure represents 30% of the children in the UK (Child Poverty Action Group 2020b). Poverty has an impact on the health and well-being of children and young people and on attainment and progress to Higher Education (Wickham et al. 2016). Disadvantaged young people face barriers to accessing Higher Education, including limited financial support and they may lack the necessary social and cultural capital (Wilson et al. 2014; McKendrick 2015). Further, disadvantaged young people are less likely to gain entrance to the more selective Universities and are more likely to drop-out of University (Social Mobility Commission 2019).

The disruption in schooling caused by the lockdown has highlighted that the disadvantages experienced by children living in poverty have become significantly worse (Blundell et al. 2020). This is expected to have a serious effect on their progress in school and their attainment. This situation impacts on Catholic schools as they engage with children suffering from these disadvantages. There are a series of issues that have come to the fore in the discussion on child poverty during the lockdown. These include digital poverty or digital exclusion as children are unable to engage or fully engage in the virtual learning environment (Holmes and Burgess 2020). In some cases, the family may have the equipment but cannot afford to pay for the wi-fi. Some families lack access to reading materials and have limited resources for home learning or even an absence of these resources. The lack of early years provision is expected to widen the attainment gap (Unicef UK 2020). There are serious concerns about the mental health and well-being of some of these children and young people. One of the most prominent and pressing issues is food poverty, or food insecurity.

## **Food Poverty and the Response to Food Poverty Under Covid-19**

Food poverty, or food insecurity, means that people do not have enough to eat or do not have enough of the right kinds of food for a healthy lifestyle. This is because they do not have sufficient income, or they cannot access appropriate food shops. Low-income families with children are particularly vulnerable (Douglas et al. 2015). Prior to Covid-19, increasing numbers of children were being affected by food poverty as their families struggled to provide food. The provision of free school meals was under threat during Covid-19 and the UK government introduced a number of measures in England including meals, food parcels and a voucher system (Department of Education 2020). The voucher system was introduced to enable eligible families with children to obtain £15 of food per week per child. The system encountered unexpected difficulties with some families experiencing delays in the receipt of the vouchers and some parents were not able to redeem vouchers at supermarkets (Burns 2020a, b). Prior to Covid-19, many families in the UK used foodbanks and this increased

dramatically during Covid-19 as families struggled with decreased or negligible incomes. The figures for the uptake at many of the foodbanks throughout the United Kingdom indicate that double the number of families with children received food parcels in March 2020 compared to March 2019 (The Trussell Trust 2020). The families that were vulnerable before Covid-19 have become more vulnerable and, since the beginning of Covid-19, more families have become vulnerable.

Catholic communities and Catholic schools were very active in their response to food insecurity before Covid-19 and many parishes and Catholic schools have provided food for vulnerable families during the period of lockdown (Burns 2020c; O'Toole 2020). Brentwood Catholic Children's Society provided supermarket vouchers before Covid-19 and faced increased demand as the lockdown ensued. St Thomas More RC Academy, North Tyneside has provided supermarket vouchers since the closure of the school caused by the Covid-19 lockdown and, by the 5 May 2020, had assisted 200 hundred children from 160 vulnerable families (Teague 2020). The Catholic Children's Society in the South East of England has helped over 2300 children from 1400 families by providing funding for food and essentials by the same date. In Scotland, the St. Nicholas Care Fund of the Archdiocese of Glasgow has provided funding for parishes and Catholic schools to support vulnerable families (Swanson 2020). The June 2020 edition of the Archdiocesan newspaper, *Flourish*, reports that St. Paul's primary in Shettleston received funding for kitchen utensils and food and Lourdes Secondary received funding for food parcels.

The next sections examine the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez to use as a Christian lens to understand the current crisis of child poverty in the UK and the impact on Catholic schools.

## **Gustavo Gutiérrez: The Evolution of his Thinking**

Gustavo Gutiérrez is one of the best known of the Liberation Theologians to emerge from Latin America. His theological journey is fascinating and his theological engagement with the Catholic Church was not always particularly easy, as his work was challenging, at times misunderstood, and prone to very serious criticism (as will be discussed below). Nevertheless, he has provided some very penetrating insights into poverty and a Catholic Christian response to poverty that extends beyond the context of Latin America and the Caribbean. Some of his theology has been influential on the contemporary thinking on poverty that is articulated by the Catholic Church. For example, he has undertaken an extensive examination of the idea of the preferential option, or option, for the poor in his writings and this idea has been used by Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis and the United States Conference of Bishops (2017).

He was born in Lima, Peru in 1928. When he began his training for the priesthood, he was sent to study in Europe between 1951 and 1959. He studied philosophy, psychology and theology at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, University of Lyons in France and the Gregorian in Italy (Groody 2011). When he returned

to Peru he was confronted by the poverty of the people and the systemic social injustice that prevailed in Peru. He did not feel that his extensive academic training had equipped him for this challenge. He was influenced by the powerful example of Bartolomé de las Casas who condemned the unjust treatment of the indigenous peoples in the Spanish colonies in the sixteenth century and re-read the scriptures from the perspective of poverty and the biblical commitment to the poor. De Las Casas preached and wrote that the indigenous people were part of the body of Christ and were to be treated as brothers and sisters, not people to be exploited (Gutiérrez 1992). De Las Casas argues in *Memorial de Remedios* (1516) that the only possible justification for Christians being in the Indies is to proclaim the Gospel and to emphasise the love of God and the love of neighbour. Similarly, Gutiérrez began to re-read history and re-read the scriptures in the context of the concrete poverty of the people in Peru and he began to develop his theology that espoused a commitment to the poor (Siker 1997).

The theology of Gutiérrez has been subjected to close scrutiny and a number of serious concerns have been expressed about issues such as his theological method, his reading and use of history, the balance in his theology between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, his adoption of some aspects of Marxist analysis and the way in which he has interpreted scripture (Berbusse 1975). There is only sufficient space to address two key concerns: The use of Marxist analysis and the use of scripture. Gutiérrez initially drew on the theory of dependence that adopted some ideas from Marxist analysis (Groody 2011). This led to some sharp criticism of the authenticity and orthodoxy of his theology (Swathwood 2014). However, Gutiérrez was not a Marxist, nor did he reach Marxist conclusions. His ideas are contradictory to Marxism. Marx had a more complex view of religion beyond the oft quoted, 'religion of the opiate of the masses', but he did view religion as illusory happiness and if people gave up this illusion, they could pursue real happiness (Raines 2002, p. 8). In contrast, Gutiérrez understands following Jesus Christ in the Christian religion as liberating not illusory (Groody 2011, p. 25).

The critics focus on his use of Marxism early in his career and often ignore the facts that he used scripture extensively and that he was influenced by a long list of thinkers and prominent Catholic theologians. For example, he was influenced by Bartolomé de las Casas, Paulo Freire, Dom Helder Camara, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar, Henri De Lubac, Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx (Horn 2008; Kirylo 2011). There were two documents issued by the Church on Liberation Theology: *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1984) and *Instruction of Christian Freedom and Liberation* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986). The first addressed 'the deviations, and risks of deviation' in certain forms of liberation theology and the second, while less critical, positioned the concept of liberation in a wider Church context and theology. It is important to recognise that these documents were aimed at 'Liberation Theology' and did not identify individuals. To expand on this point, Groody rightly advises that, 'at no time was Gustavo or his writings ever reproved by the Vatican' (Groody 2011, p. 25). It is instructive to consider the major work on Bartolomé de las Casas by Gutiérrez that was published after these documents

in 1993. This book works on a number of levels: It provides a historical account and also provides a platform for Gutiérrez to expound his Liberation Theology. This book has no mention of dependence theory nor any Marxist analysis but focusses on the profound implications of the Christian call to love of one's neighbour for contemporary theology (Smith 2002 p. 70).

As has been stated, his re-reading of scripture and his continued use of scripture are an extremely important foundation for his theology (Siker 1996). While he is not a formal exegete, he is a theologian with strong scriptural basis. He and other Liberation Theologians are criticised for their use of scripture in a number of ways. It is argued that scripture is used in a selective way to serve a specific purpose (Burchell 1991, p. 15). It is claimed that scripture is used to support a form of advocacy, the 'proponents advocate that the results be used to change today's social, political or religious situation' (Brown 1997, pp. 27–28). A counter argument to this is that the biblical writers themselves could be considered to have practiced a form of advocacy. They were writing in specific social, political and religious situations. The prophets were calling for a return to the Lord and the Covenant. The four gospel writers wrote in different contexts and addressed different situations. Luke's gospel has a strong focus on the ministry of Jesus for the poor, the excluded and marginalised and the right use of material possessions (Luke 4:16–22, 6:20–26, 12:33–34; 14:16–24, 14:33, 16:19–31; Bovon 2002; McKinney 2018a). This latter point can also be discerned in the Luke's Acts of Apostles. The representation of the very early Christian community in Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35 is one where the members sell their possessions and goods, and everything was held in common and shared according to individual needs.

I will now examine and discuss three themes in the theology and thinking of Gutiérrez: (1) poverty, sacred scripture and the poverty of Jesus; (2) the preferential option for the poor and (3) the *irruption of the poor*.

## Poverty, Sacred Scripture and the Poverty of Jesus

Siker (1996) points out that Gutiérrez draws on many passages from scripture that highlight poverty and some of the most frequently used are passages from Psalms, Exodus and Is: 40–66, Matthew 25:31–46 and Luke 4:16–20. Gutiérrez provides insights into why poverty, and the condition of the poor, are highlighted in scriptures in *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). First, poverty is a scandalous condition and those who impoverish others are to be condemned, according to the scriptures. Poverty and marginalisation of the other are contradictory to the demands placed on the people who have been freed from slavery in Egypt. They were called to follow the holiness code to strive to be holy like God and to follow God's example of care and concern for the poor and defenceless (McKinney 2018b). Second, poverty is not coherent with the Genesis account of God telling men and women to be fruitful, to flourish (Genesis 1:28). We can add that they have been blessed by God and are part of a creation that God saw as very good (Genesis 1: 28, 31). Finally, Gutiérrez adds that the impoverishment of people is an offense to God and to the fact that we are created

in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). Poverty was not God's intention for humanity. Gutiérrez is concerned about exclusion and marginalisation, including discrimination towards women and emphasised the equality and complementarity of men and women in *The God of Life*. He states that 'man and woman alike are created in the image of God and for God', they are created together in the image of God (Gutiérrez 1991, p. 167).

Jesus chose to be born into poverty, the irruption of God as a member of a people in an occupied land.

To the eyes of Christians the incarnation is the irruption of God into human history: an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of the overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world; an irruption that smells of the stable (IBID, p. 85).

This irruption that 'smells of the stable' is in contrast to the domination by a great Empire. Gutiérrez points to the poverty of Jesus and the mission of Jesus to the poor (though not exclusively). The focus on the poor is prefigured before the ministry of Jesus in this gospel in the events around the birth of Jesus, the Magnificat of Mary and the preaching of John the Baptist (McKinney 2018c). Jesus proclaimed that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit to preach the Good News to the poor in Luke 4: 18 (Green 1994 p. 61). He was an itinerant preacher and he does not appear to have a permanent dwelling once he begins his ministry. Gutiérrez (1983) comments that Jesus has pitched his tent among us. He lived in solidarity with the poor, preached the right use of possessions and the just treatment of the poor.

## The Preferential Option for the Poor

Gutiérrez draws a distinction between three types of poverty: real or material poverty, voluntary poverty and spiritual poverty (Gutiérrez, 2010 in Groody 2011 pp. 190–192). Real or material poverty is not simply about being deprived of material needs, it is also about other forms of disadvantage that affect the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean. These include social insignificance, marginalisation, non-recognition of human rights. People can be deemed to be insignificant because of 'economics, race, gender, culture, ethnicity, or other reasons'. Voluntary poverty is to live life with the poor, following the example of Jesus who chose to live a life of poverty. Spiritual poverty is to place our lives in the hands of God, to follow the will of God, and this will mean, like the first disciples, a detachment and freedom from material goods. One of the driving principles of solidarity of the poor is a commitment to the eradication of poverty by tackling the root causes.

Gutiérrez explains that the term *preferential option for the poor* has to be properly understood (Hartnett 2003). God has a preferential option for the poor because they are 'living in a situation that is contrary to God's will' not because they are morally or religiously better than other people (Gutiérrez 1989 p. 93). Poverty refers to the real poor, the material poor, not the spiritual poor. These are people who are deemed to be non-persons, people considered to be insignificant from the perspectives of

economics, politics and culture. The word *preferential* does not denote preference for the poor to the exclusion of others. God's love does not exclude anybody. The word *option* might seem to suggest a choice in the English language, but in Spanish it means more than this and evokes the idea of commitment. The option of the poor cannot be conceived as an option, a choice, it is integral to Christian life, a commitment. Gutiérrez references Gregory Baum who described the option for the poor as 'the contemporary form of discipleship' (Gutiérrez 2009). In a discussion of Mark 10: 35–45, Gutiérrez comments that following Jesus Christ is not simply about a profession of faith but about following the example of Jesus (1983).

### *The Irruption of the Poor*

Gutiérrez and the other Liberation theologians were reacting to the poverty and marginalisation of people in Latin America and the Caribbean. They described the situation as the *irruption of the poor*, the voices of the poor could no longer be ignored; they were irrupting into space and time. This irruption can be understood to be a moment in time, an event. It was also the culmination, but not the end point, of a process. It would not have occurred without the popular movement and the base Christian communities (Nickoloff 1993; Humphrey 2011). The poverty of the people is a scandal, an affront to Christianity; it is evident from the scriptures that God does not want poverty but justice. The irruption of the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean provided a voice for the voiceless and a hope that there could be no turning back, no reverting to the previous regimes and injustices. The progress has been slow and, at times, painful (Comblin 2009).

The Catholic community and Catholic schools and the rest of the United Kingdom are arguably now experiencing their own *irruption of the poor*. Like the irruption in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is an event and the culmination of a process, and not an end point. There is a growing body of sociological, medical and educational research evidence and theory to provide insights into poverty, the effects of poverty and child poverty. The levels of child poverty were increasing before the Covid-19 and are unlikely to improve in the short term, or even long term, after the threat to physical health posed by Covid-19 has waned. The word 'vulnerable' has been used frequently during the time of the virus to identify those at most risk from the virus or from the effects of the virus on society. The irruption of the poor includes the most vulnerable: the elderly, the disabled and the children and young people who experience poverty.

The messages of the scriptures on poverty, announced to each generation, seem particularly applicable to the present time. Many Catholic schools in the United Kingdom were founded to educate the children of the poor and have a long history of care for the poor (Grace 2002). Catholic schools provided free meals and clothing for children in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to encourage them to attend school (McLaughlin et al. 1996; McKinney 2017, 2020). The current context in society means that Catholic schools are returning to these practices or intensifying



these practices. Catholic schools are addressing the poverty of the children and young people as best they can, often with limited resources. The response of the Catholic schools is inspirational, and, at the same time, it is deeply disturbing and dispiriting that this should be the situation in the twenty-first century.

## Concluding Remarks

If we are witnessing our own *irruption of the poor* in the United Kingdom, then, progress may be slow and painful. As has been stated earlier in this chapter, there are very many ways to understand the complexity of poverty, the effects of poverty and the impact on the education of children. Gutiérrez argues that poverty cannot be reduced to a social issue or an economic issue (Gutiérrez 2009). Poverty is ‘inhumane and antievangelical’ and has become a global human problem. This global problem of the *irruption of the poor* must be understood in concrete situations in local contexts and that is why the specific examples from Brentwood, North Tyneside and Glasgow are so important. These are different from situations in Latin America and the Caribbean but the reality of poverty for families and children is equally challenging. Many Catholic schools encounter the effects of child poverty on a daily basis. The theology of Gutiérrez provides a Christian lens to understand and respond to poverty and child poverty from a Christian perspective. It is scandalous and counter to God’s intentions for humanity. This is very clear from the scriptures that highlight the God-given dignity bestowed on women and men when they were made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus provided an example when he chose poverty, lived a poor life and preached the Good news to the poor. One of the striking aspects of the theology of Gutiérrez is his focus on discipleship, the call to discipleship and the demands of discipleship. These demands may be difficult at times, but Gutiérrez advises that they are necessary to live life as disciples according to the teaching of Jesus and the tradition of care for the poor repeatedly found in the scriptures (Gutiérrez 2009).

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